

Duxbury and slavery: ship captain Amasa Delano's adventures with slave ship Tryal

By Mary McKenzie
Clipper reporter

New England was against slavery long before the Civil War and Massachusetts was at the forefront of that effort with an early law forbidding ownership of slaves back in 1783. Abolitionist voices like those of the Bradford family and Seth Sprague were born and raised in Duxbury.

However, Duxbury's connection to shipping before the Civil War meant that crewmen and ship captains who hailed from this town had brushes with the African slave industry, as human captives were being shipped as cargo all over the world.

One of the most notable of those incidents happened in South America for a Duxbury ship captain named Amasa Delano, who was on a sealing expedition on the *Perseverance* with a largely New England crew.

This event was memorialized famously in Herman Melville's 1855 story "Benito Cereno." Many years later, Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves, a distant relative of Delano, edited Delano's own 1817 book, "A Narrative of Voyages," which detailed treks around the world, including this bloody and disastrous one. Her book, "Delano's Voyages of Commerce and Discovery," was released in 1994.

Twenty years later, in 2014, Delano's encounter was studied again by Greg Grandin in his book, "The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom and Deception in the New World," which he researched at Duxbury's Rural and Historical Society's Drew Archives.

Delano wrote about coming across the Spanish slave ship *Tryal* off the coast of Chile in February of 1805, when the ship "acted awkwardly."

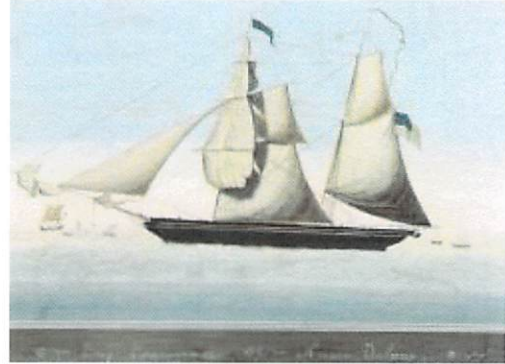
Delano and his men, because of the nature of their business, had plenty of weapons on board, so they approached the Spanish ship "well-manned and well-armed."

When the *Perseverance* crew got on board *Tryal*, they initially thought ship captain Benito Cereno was in charge of the ship and that he was merely ill. But, when Delano left the *Tryal* to return to his own ship, Cereno jumped onto *Perseverance* after him. Surprised, Delano learned that the *Tryal* had been overtaken by a slave revolt.

This revealed the ruse that had been played out for Delano and his crew. The slaves on board had killed about 18 Spanish crewmen, most of their captors, and were hoping to get Cereno to bring them home – he signed a document the slaves drew up promising to do so – but he had actually just moved the ship around a bit and said later in court that he was concerned to dock the boat anywhere because he thought all the Spaniards on board would be killed as soon as their African captives, primarily from Senegal, saw land.

Cereno said he told the revolt leaders that he knew a return trip to Africa wouldn't work because the ship needed repairs, food and water and was in desperate need of all three before it had even come to the coastline of Chile.

The revolt on *Tryal* had happened in December 1804, about two months before Delano and his men came across the boat on Feb. 20, 1805. At this point, everyone on board *Tryal* was



Perseverance was the ship captained by Duxbury's Amasa Delano, who came across a Spanish slave ship off the coast of Chile in February 1805. That ship had been taken over by the slaves on board and according to Delano, what ensued was a "truly horrid" story.

Images courtesy the Duxbury
Rural & Historical Society

starving and the Africans who were in command over the slave ship were hoping to get help from Perseverance.

They realized it was most likely to happen if it didn't look like they had taken over, so they had Cereno pretend to still be in charge and they pretended to be his slaves.

When Delano realized this was a big act, he and his men went back and fought to regain control over the Tryal. At least six of the Africans on board the Spanish ship died in the fight that ensued. It should be noted that Delano had unhappily found out just before that he had 17 extra men – stowaways – from a trek to Australia. Some were convicts from Botany Bay whom Delano described as “ever unfaithful.”

After the Perseverance crew had attained control, they went back to their ship. They came back the next morning with handcuffs and shackles but found that the captives on board had been tortured by the Spanish crew overnight.

“Truly horrid,” Delano wrote. Delano said he would have them flogged for “cutting to pieces and killing these poor unfortunate beings,” and the torture ended.

Tryal landed in Chile and the 20-some remaining men and 28 women and children and nine infants on board that slave ship were brought to trial. Most were turned into slaves, exactly what they had been trying so hard to avoid, and the men Cereno listed as organizers were executed – dragged out of prison on the tails of “beasts of burden” and taken to the place where they would be hanged. After they died, their heads were put on poles in the Port of Talcahuano. All of their bodies were burned. The captive women and children from Senegal were made to watch the executions.

The court proceedings involved in this international case – not the slave revolt, which was dealt with in two weeks – but the second part of this case, in which Perseverance sought half the value of the ship's cargo as payment for squashing the revolt and bringing the ship to port, lasted two months. Perseverance and crew did not leave Chile until April 1805, and Cereno did not want to give away half of the proceeds because he said the promise he made to Delano had been made in duress under a life or death situation. He intimated to the court officials that he considered Delano to be a pirate.

For bringing Tryal to Chile, Delano received a gold medal from the King of Spain for bravery and recognition by the nation of Chile. Many newspaper articles around the country were devoted to the American bravery on the high seas, paving the way for the tales he shared via Boston Independent Chronicle and “A Narrative of Voyages.”

Delano died in 1823 at the age of 60. Within 10 years of his death, a childhood Duxbury neighbor, Seth Sprague, would become a staunch abolitionist and help form the New England Anti-Slavery Society.



Charles Drew, one of the owners of Plato, where runaway slave Charlotte Hemenway worked as a crew member under the name of Charles.



Amasa Delano wrote a book about his adventures with the slave revolt on the ship Tryal in 1804.

Information for this article was obtained from the following: “Benito Cereno” by Herman Melville, 1855; “Delano’s Voyages of Commerce and Discovery,” edited by Eleanor Roosevelt Seagraves, 1994; “Narrative of Voyages,” by Amasa Delano, 1817; “Empire of Necessity,” by Greg Grandin, 2014. These materials are all available at the DRHS Drew Archives Library.

Slaves in Duxbury

Records of slaves in Duxbury can be found in a book of the town's history published before the civil war.

Author Justin Winsor, who wrote the "History of Duxbury" in 1849, found several documentations about slaves living in town. Many of these slaves were from Africa or, in the early years of Plymouth Colony, were Native Americans who either had the misfortune of being caught in battle or "were convicted of certain crimes (and) were condemned to be sold as slaves."

The following are some instances of slavery as listed in Winsor's book:

- Duxbury's Samuel Seabury, who died in 1681, put the sale of his slave Nimrod in his will and then gave his slave Jane to his wife.
- Colonel John Alden owned a slave named Hampshire, who married a Native American named Mary Jones in 1718.
- Lt. Thomas Loring, who died in 1717, left three slaves to his son Thomas in his will. Thomas, who also owned a slave named Bill, (called William Fortune), freed his slaves in 1752.

Not all the slaves were adults:

- Winsor found a document from 1759 listing the death of 10-year old slave: "Died Richard Loudon's Negro girl, about 10 years old."
 - Winsor also found a 1741 deed conveying a 23-year old slave named Dick from owner John Cooper of Plymouth to George Partridge of Duxbury.
- Mary McKenzie

The runaway slave who was not what he appeared

Duxbury Ship Captain Jonathon Smith, the brother-in-law of master carpenter Charles Drew, was sailing an 87-foot ship called Plato that Drew built in 1811. Smith was the co-owner of that ship, along with brother-in-laws, Reuben Drew and Joshua Magoon.

The boat primarily was used to trade with Europe. In 1816, while in the South, Smith took on a young black crew member named Charles Hemenway, who was with him on a trip to the West Indies. When Smith got to Baltimore, Hemenway was discovered to be a runaway female slave and was jailed. Smith wrote to his wife Zilpah in a letter dated July 29, 1816, about this curious incident. The letter is available at the Drew Archives.

Smith wrote: "...I am going to tell you a romantic tale that will rather surprise you as it is founded on facts. I suppose that you recollect the boy that I shipped to go in the Plato after the war, that I told you left me in Baltimore, if you recollect his name was Charles Hemenway, that same person was discovered to be a girl and was put in jail for a runaway where she now is. I have been before a Justice and gave my opinion that she was free and there is a Quaker here that is endeavoring to her out of jail. She says that her name is Charlotte Williams Hemenway. You may depend that I was not a little surprised to see him metamorphed, he had made one voyage from here to the West Indies. I hope that the poor thing will get clear for she is in a bad (torn page). It is really funny that I should ship a woman for a man. I will look out better for the time to come."

"There is not much to go on in this story to help ascertain Charlotte's origins or even whether she was black or white," said Duxbury Rural and Historical Society archivist Carolyn Ravenscroft. "My hope is that this article will find its way onto the computer screen of someone who has more information on Charlotte Hemenway, perhaps a researcher or descendant, and we will learn the rest of her story."

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